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Misguided advice

Strange how the folks who want to get the government off the backs of the American people want to put the government on the backs of foreigners. President-elect Ronald Reagan's transition team for the Central Intelligence Agency wants the agency to put more emphasis on "covert action" outside the United States.

The term is a euphemism for meddling in the affairs of other people. At one time, the CIA had hundreds of covert-action projects in scores of countries. The actions included fomenting coups, planning assassinations and conducting paramilitary operations.

The CIA wisely de-emphasized covert action. The Senate Intelligence Committee in 1976 found that "the evidence points toward the failure of paramilitary activity as a technique of covert action," and raised questions about the effectiveness and propriety of covert action generally.

Americans call it "subversion" when foreigners try to undermine their government, and they rightly resent it. They should also resent secret American efforts to subvert foreign powers, including democratically elected governments. Iran's resentment of the United States is a direct consequence of

this country's history of covert action in Iran.

Americans are appalled at the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the threatened invasion of Poland. Invasion at least is overt, and the Soviets can be held accountable. Covert activity may be just as effective in putting a government under the thumb of a foreign power, but there is no public accountability. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger testified that one reason he had the CIA conduct a war in Laos was that it could be done in secret.

An insidious feature of covert action is that Americans may be victimized by their own government. Phony stories planted in the foreign press as part of a covert "black propaganda" operation sometimes are disseminated worldwide and deceive readers in all countries.

Secrecy and covert action go hand in hand. When Reagan's transition team calls for a step-up in covert action, it means it wants more secrecy in the exercise of government power.

That's not the vision Reagan held out during his election campaign. His choice for CIA director, William Casey, should disavow the recommendation for stepped-up covert action.